

THE IDEAL AND THE REALITY

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to the children of light concerned with rent
rolls and
farming profits, not less than to the feudal
aristocracy,
with whom the heads of the ecclesiastical
hierarchy
were inextricably intermingled. When their
chance
came, John Nameless, and John the Miller,
and John
Carter, who may be presumed to have
known their
friends, burned the court rolls of an abbot of
St. Albans,
and cut off the head of an archbishop,
and ran riot
on the estates of an abbot of ftempten, with
not less
enthusiasm than they showed in plundering
their lay
exploiters. It was not the Church, but
revolting
peasants in Germany and England, who
appealed to
the fact that "Christ has made all men
free";¹
and in Germany, at least, their ecclesiastical
masters
showed small mercy to them. The
disappearance of
serfdom—and, after all, it did not
disappear from
France till late in the eighteenth century,
and from
Germany till the nineteenth—was part of a
general
economic movement, with which the Church
had little
to do, and which churchmen, as property-
owners, had
sometimes resisted. It owed less to
Christianity than
to the humanitarian liberalism of the French
Revolution.

The truth was that the very triumph of
the Church
closed its mouth. The Church of the third
century, a
minority of believers confronted with an

alien civilization, might protest and criticize. But, when the whole heaven was mixed with the lump, when the Church was regarded, not as a society, but as society itself, it was inevitably diluted by the mass which it absorbed.

The result was a compromise—a compromise of which the critic can say, "How much that was intolerable was accepted!" and the eulogist "How much that was intolerable was softened!"

Both critic and eulogist are right. For if religious opinion acquiesced in much, it also claimed much, and the habit of mind which made the mediaeval Church almost impotent when dealing with the serious abuses of the mediaeval land system was precisely that which